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ABSTRACT

This paper defines technical writing as writing about subjects in the sciences in which the writer informs the reader through an objective presentation of facts. The emphasis in the definition is on three aspects of writing: the writer's subject; the writer's purpose; and the writer's attitude. A stanza from Shelley's "To a Skylark" and the entry for "Skylark" from an ornithology handbook provide a contrast which illustrates the difference between technical writing and writing for an artistic purpose. (TS)

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A Basic Definition of Technical Writing

At our conference in St. Louis last year, I attended a session on technical writing at which a speaker used as an illustration of technical writing the text of one of former-President Nixon's televised addresses on Watergate. I am not sure about the proper genre for Nixon's Watergate addresses--though fiction seems appropriate--but I am sure that they are not technical writing.

I have brought with me today a basic definition of technical writing that we use in our basic technical writing course and in our advanced technical writing course at New Mexico State University. The definition does what any definition should do. It limits. Fortunately for all of us here who teach technical writing, it limits technical writing so that Nixon's Watergate addresses are not a part of our field.

Over the years, I have tried the definition on hundreds of students. And as enrollment in our technical writing courses has increased far beyond my ability to staff all our sections myself, I have tried the definition on colleagues in my department who now staff our sections with me. My students and my colleagues have no criticisms of the definition.

But I have never tried the definition on colleagues outside my department. Or at least I have never tried it on colleagues outside my university. I am eager to try the definition on you now for your criticisms.

The definition owes much to the distinguished Professor John A. Walter, on my right, and to his distinguished text, Technical Writing. But I like to think that the definition is my own.

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In our program at New Mexico State University, we define technical writing as writing about subjects in the sciences in which the writer informs the reader through an objective presentation of facts. The emphasis in the definition is on three aspects of writing: (1) the writer's subject, which is a subject in the sciences; (2) the writer's purpose, which is to inform the reader; and (3) the writer's attitude, which is objective, an objective presentation of facts. Although the emphasis is on only three aspects of writing--subject, purpose, and attitude--these three aspects seem to me to be rather inclusive of all that is involved in any piece of writing.

Bear in mind, please, as you consider the definition, that it is only a basic definition. It needs further definition. We define the sciences. We define the pure sciences as those sciences in which knowledge is sought for its own sake and the applied sciences as those sciences in which knowledge from the pure sciences is put to use. We comment on informs by referring to the derivation of the word science from the Latin scīre, "to know," and by suggesting that when the writer informs he helps the reader to know. We comment on objective by referring to it as an adjective that describes a state of mind free from bias--or at least as free from bias as it is possible for a human mind to be. And we attempt a definition of that slippery word facts. We define facts as pieces of information that can be proved accurate either by simple experience or by scientific observation and experimentation.

Then we illustrate the definition. A stanza from Shelley's "To a Skylark" and the entry for "SKYLARK" from an ornithology handbook provide a neat contrast. (See the attachment.)

In the first piece of writing, the first stanza of Shelley's "To a Skylark," the subject, of course, is the skylark of the title. But that skylark is not the skylark of science, not the skylark of ornithology. It is, in line 1, more spirit than skylark: "Hail to thee, blithe Spirit!" By line 2, it is not a bird at all: "Bird thou never wert." By line 3, it is an angel or almost an angel: "That from Heaven, or near it." It is an angel singing angelically in lines 4 and 5: "Pourest thy full heart/ In profuse strains of unpremeditated art." Although the subject is scientific, it is not treated scientifically here, unless, as I like to tell my students, "angelology" is a science. The writer's purpose is not to inform the reader but to move the reader. His purpose is to make the reader sense the beauty of the song of the skylark as it pours its "full heart" in those "profuse strains of unpremeditated art." And the writer's attitude is not objective but subjective. He is moved, himself, by the beauty of the song of the skylark. At least he is moved enough that he writes the poem.

The neat contrast is provided in the second piece of writing, Edgar M. Reilly, Jr.'s entry for "SKYLARK" in The Audubon Illustrated Handbook of American Birds. The subject here is no spirit but the feathers-and-blood skylark of science, the skylark of ornithology, complete with its scientific name, Alauda arvensis. The writer's purpose is not to move the reader but to inform the reader. His purpose is to inform of "Appearance," "Voice," "Range and status," "Habitat," "Seasonal movements," "Biology," and even of "Suggested reading" for the reader who wants more information. And the writer' s attitude is not subjective by objective. It is an objective presentation of facts, facts about the skylark unaffected by any biases that the writer might have toward that bird. That is, the

writer's attitude is objective with one exception. You undoubtedly noted the slip into subjectivity in the section on "Voice": the word beautiful in "it is a long, beautiful song." Students are quick to note the exception too. And I am delighted, of course, when they point out this slip from technical writing because I know then that they have begun to understand the basic definition of technical writing that I offer for your criticisms today.

A BASIC DEFINITION OF TECHNICAL WRITING

Technical writing is writing about subjects in the sciences in which the writer informs the reader through an objective presentation of facts. A stanza of "To a Skylark" illustrates what technical writing is not; the entry for "SKYLARK" in The Audubon Illustrated Handbook of American Birds illustrates what technical writing is.

To a Skylark

Hail to thee, blithe Spirit!
Bird thou never wert,
That from Heaven, or near it,
Pourest thy full heart
In profuse strains of unpremeditated art.*

SKYLARK (Alauda arvensis)

Appearance: Between Robin and House Sparrow in size (7-7 1/2 in.). The Skylark is brown above, streaked with black and darker brown; the tail has 2 white outer tail feathers on each side. The breast and flanks are light buffy brown, streaked and spotted with dark brown, and the rest of the underparts are white. The bill, legs, and feet are yellowish, and the eyes dark brown.

Voice: The song, which has been the subject of much poetry, is delivered while the bird is poised on pulsing wings well above the ground; it is a long, beautiful song, replete with trills and cadenzas at a rather high pitch. Its note outside the courtship season is a loud, clear, bubbly chir-r-r-up.

Range and status: Native of Europe, n. and c. Asia, and n. Africa. Introduced and established in Hawaii and on Vancouver I., B.C., where it is resident; not successful on Long I., N.Y., where it was last recorded in 1913. Locally common.

Habitat: Open fields and cultivated land.

Seasonal movements: None in America.

Biology: Nest: A grass-lined hollow on ground in fields. Eggs: 3-4; whitish ground color nearly hidden by spots of brown and gray. Incubation: 11-12 days; 13-14 in incubator. Age at 1st flight: 9-10 days. Food: Weed seeds and grain; almost 50% insects and small invertebrates.

Suggested reading: G.D. Sprot, "Notes on the Introduced Skylark in the Victoria District of Vancouver Island," Condor, vol. 39, pp. 24-30, 1937.**

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*Percy Bysshe Shelley, The Norton Anthology of Poetry, ed. Arthur M. Eastman (New York, 1970), p. 660.

**Edgar M. Reilly, Jr., The Audubon Illustrated Handbook of American Birds (New York, 1968), pp. 299-300.